

VZCZCXYZ0003
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0099/01 0511752
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 201752Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5991
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T TUNIS 000099

SIPDIS

NEA/PPD; NEA/MAG (NARDI/STEWART); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT FRIENDS?: FACEBOOK POPULAR, DESPITE DOMESTIC
SMEAR CAMPAIGN

REF: A. 08 SECTO 08
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 926
[1](#)C. 08 TUNIS 615
[1](#)D. 08 TUNIS 580
[1](#)E. 08 TUNIS 408

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S) As one of the few social networking sites where Tunisians, especially Tunisian youth, can publicly gather and discuss issues ranging from sports to politics, Facebook has become extremely popular. Tunisian users grew by about 70,000 to 294,242 in the past month. Some people use the site to engage in a frank political discussion and exchange of ideas that is singular for a public forum in Tunisia. The GOT blocked the site briefly in 2008, causing a public outcry. President Ben Ali told then-Secretary Rice in September 2008 that he only discovered the site was blocked when his sixteen-year old daughter complained and immediately ordered the ban lifted. Recently, however, there have been articles in the government-controlled press that attempt to discredit the site, suggesting that some in the GOT hope to discourage visits and perhaps change the president's mind. End Summary.

Something for Everyone

[1](#)2. (C) Facebook fills an important need that Tunisians lack elsewhere: a public place to "meet" and discuss topics freely. Media outlets in Tunisia shy away from exploring topics relevant to today's youth such as unemployment, immigration, and cost of living. Journalists have told EmbOffs that discussion of domestic social issues, especially if it might remotely imply the government is lacking in some regard, is off limits. Free speech in schools and university campuses is likewise strictly controlled; plainclothes police maintain a constant presence on campus and the national student union is harassed. In a country where expression is monitored and controlled, Facebook can also provide a degree of anonymity and the freedom that goes with it. Though access to the internet in Tunisia is controlled (Ref D), nothing prevents Facebook users from using an alias online, or not posting photos. According to an online search, on February 19 there were 294,242 Tunisian users on Facebook, up from 223,955 on January 6. Of those, roughly 76 percent are between the ages of 18 and 34. The degree of Facebook user's enthusiasm is also noteworthy. Several Embassy contacts, including many middle-aged Tunisians, have told EmbOffs they spend hours everyday on Facebook.

13. (C) Most Tunisian Facebook groups are not political, for example "Clubbing in Tunisia" with 4,393 members, "Evanescence Fans Tunisia" with 250 members, or the two groups dedicated to bringing Starbucks to Tunisia. Several sizable groups, however, are political such as "I Have a Dream: a Democratic Tunisia" (2,305 members), "Alliance of Tunisian Facebook Groups Against Censorship" (534 members), "Stop Torture in Tunisia" (1,233 members), and "Corruption in Tunisia" (625 members). Another group, "Making Fun of the Cult of Number 7 in Tunisia" (1,666 members), pokes fun at the GOT's tendency to name everything from roads to the official television station after the number seven. (Note: President Ben Ali first came to power in a constitutional coup on November 7th, 1987). For others, it's an informal way to keep in touch with colleagues, such as the "Tunisian Pharmacists, Dentists, and Doctors" group (723 members).

14. (C) Civil society activists have also embraced Facebook. Though human rights lawyer Mohamed Abbou has not been allowed to leave the country since his release from prison (Note: He was arrested in 2005 for defaming the judicial system and assault, but paroled in 2007), he has over 500 friends from several different countries on Facebook. For opposition parties and human rights activists, Facebook is a useful tool as their personal websites or blogs are vulnerable to destruction by hackers. (Note: On February 2 Global Voice Online listed sixteen websites or blogs of prominent Tunisian activists that were hacked between July 6, 2007 and November 5, 2008). Facebook has also become something of a news source for Tunisians. Long before news of unemployment protests in the southwestern mining regions near Gafsa was reported in the mainstream press (Ref C), several Facebook groups were formed to support the

demonstrators online. One site in support of the protestors even includes comprehensive electronic files providing background information. The groups also contain information that was never reported via official media outlets, such links to videos and photos of the demonstrations. After the leader of the Gafsa protests Adnan Hajji was sentenced to ten years and one month in prison (the sentence was reduced to eight years on appeal), Facebook users posted many comments condemning the sentence.

Beware of Facebook

15. (S) Though torture, censorship, and corruption are hot topics online, Tunisia lacks forums in the real world with corresponding debates. Newspapers that touch on sensitive topics such as these may experience sudden distribution problems or be taken off the shelves outright (Ref E). Given this, it is interesting that the GOT allows online the type of conversations it prohibits in print, radio, television. From August 18 to September 3, 2008 Facebook was temporarily blocked (Ref B), but the censorship provoked a public outcry. The major French language daily Le Temps went so far as to print messages from its readers protesting the censorship of Facebook. In September 2008, President Ben Ali told then-Secretary Rice that he first learned that public access to the site had been blocked when his teenage daughter complained, and immediately gave instructions that site be allowed (Ref A).

16. (C) Though the GOT has not attempted to block Facebook since mid-2008, there has been a smear campaign against the site in the government-controlled press. The most recent attack occurred on January 27 when the private Arabic-weekly al-Hadath (which is considered the mouthpiece of the Ministry of the Interior) published an article reporting that 160,000 Tunisians have fallen into the "trap" of Facebook. The article entitled, "Sex, Drugs, Violence, Terrorism, and Spying: Is Facebook Innocent?" asks its readers, "Do you want your personal secrets to go to American intelligence agencies?" The article claims that drug dealers use Facebook to find clients, and laments that police are unable to monitor the site to prevent networking among "sexually

abnormal people" and prostitution. In addition, the paper opined that Facebook is used by extremists who incite hatred.

It cautioned its readers that the internet has been used by terrorists to commit crimes all over the world, and warned parents to beware of Facebook because the social networking website's objective "is not freedom of opinion and free circulation of information as they (presumably Americans) pretend." The ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally's Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani told a group in Sousse that, "we need to protect public opinion from negative destructive ideas spread by modern technology."

Comment

¶7. (C/NF) Facebook is a useful indicator of public opinion (albeit only those with internet access), as Tunisia lacks a free press or reliable polls. The site is growing exponentially, and its popularity is likely to continue to increase, particularly but not exclusively among Tunisian youth. There has been speculation that some in the GOT might eventually use the accusations in the press against Facebook, namely that it promotes prostitution and extremism, to justify shutting down the site in the future. The GOT blocks many other websites that it considers problematic, e.g., YouTube. Overcoming Ben Ali's previous direct order regarding Facebook, however, would be difficult. The GOT might be better off asking itself not, "How to contain Facebook?" but rather, "How to address the concerns that people have raised?" End Comment.
Godec